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# How Does a School Support Students Who Experience Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Challenges?

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How Does a School Support Students Who Experience Social, Emotional, and Behavioral  
Challenges?

by

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### Abstract

This qualitative study identified how educators and administrators support elementary school students who experience social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. Semi-structured interviews were used to understand how students are supported through Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) in an elementary school. We interviewed six participants, including one administrator, two general educators, one literacy specialist, and two learning specialists. The results revealed the frequent use of common strategies within MTSS that included Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS) and Behavioral Support Plan (BSP) tools and strategies. These strategies included: (a) zones of regulation, (b) in-class or out-of-class support from education specialists, (c) check in, check out, (d) social skills groups, and (e) class points or point sheets. Despite the participants' distinct roles, each reported the need for a stronger focus and training on social behavior to support students with intensive needs as well as more use of MTSS throughout the school and in the classrooms. Based on these findings, using MTSS to support students who are at risk for learning challenges emphasizes a school's need for implementation of an evidence-based framework to further support students who experience social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. This study contributes to the field of psychology by expressing the need for more social, emotional, and behavioral support systems in schools and be used as a guide to promote the support for children who experience similar challenges. Future research could include collecting additional qualitative data through larger samples, classroom observations, and reporting on students' responses to intervention.

**Keywords:** MTSS (Multi-Tiered Systems of Support), Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS) systems, Behavioral Support Plans (BSP), social-emotional challenges, behavioral needs, elementary school students, interview, qualitative content analysis

## How Does a School Support Students Who Experience Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Challenges?

Learners may experience academic, language, or social-emotional challenges at school. This study aimed to add to the existing knowledge and understand how schools support young students at risk for learning challenges. Through implementing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), educators may utilize tools and resources to actively identify and validate needs for success for most, if not all, students. The MTSS framework focuses on the use of data to guide systems to support teachers in the implementation of core instruction, targeted intervention, and intensive intervention that can meet the needs of all students and aims to support each student with an evidence-based plan of support (Center on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, 2023). Furthermore, school educators and staff teams can assist the students who need this extra support through a more structured and evidence-based support system, which will also assist the staff by having an available framework with several resources and tools that can be used to reduce the stress of supporting several students all at once.

The current educational system in the United States is thought to focus more on a student's academic achievements than the student's social, emotional, and behavioral needs. According to Knesek (2022; para. 2), "Students have become more focused on the rewards and punishments, namely grades (an extrinsic motivator), and less on the desired behavior, learning (an intrinsic motivator)." While students should still take their academic performance seriously, educators should focus on the student's social, emotional, and behavioral needs to fully provide students with the confidence to succeed. By switching focus, students may be more willing to learn and improve their academic performance by understanding that they control their learning outcomes (Knesek, 2022). To support students in being intrinsically motivated, students should

be supported by a framework like MTSS centered around positive reinforcement and positive behavior support systems. This will allow students to take control of their learning while also getting the support they need that is not just academic support.

Furthermore, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support intend to provide multilevel evidence-based support for all students. However, MTSS is not exclusive to only supporting students. For example, teachers may experience stressors throughout the school year that may affect their well-being and the support given to their students. These stressors range from student behavior cases, poor working conditions, and lack of emotional support, which can all be linked to teacher burnout and higher turnover rates (Ingersoll et al., 2007, as cited in Ross et al., 2011). However, according to Ross et al. (2011), providing effective school-wide behavior support systems for students can also give teachers the necessary tools to maintain their educational efforts and mental wellness. Therefore, teachers may benefit from implementing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support in their classrooms.

By active use of MTSS or similar frameworks with fidelity in the classrooms, educators can assist in the change of a more positive social culture in their schools and classrooms. Positive change in the classroom and schools can look like using PBIS and similar strategies that improve teaming structures, opportunities for collaboration, and positive interactions with adults and students, while also aiding in teaching behavior expectations and positive reinforcement strategies in the classroom (Ross et al., 2011). In addition, educators who are presented with using similar strategies to assist students may be able to support their well-being by having these structures and strategies to use to reduce burnout. As a result, both students and teachers can benefit from implementing MTSS in their schools and classrooms by improving the social culture and supporting emotional and behavioral aspects.

With a widespread change in school systems, children need more significant support for their social, emotional, and behavioral well-being rather than support in language, writing, and math assistance. Without providing support to the children who are struggling, there becomes a decrease in the student's willingness to engage in the classroom, thus affecting their academic outcomes and putting them at risk for learning challenges. Supporting these needs through Multi-Tiered Systems of Support can give students the option for structured support as well as provide a way to get the appropriate assistance in their schooling. Educators may also see the benefit of using MTSS with fidelity through having a support system when they need it the most.

### **Background Information**

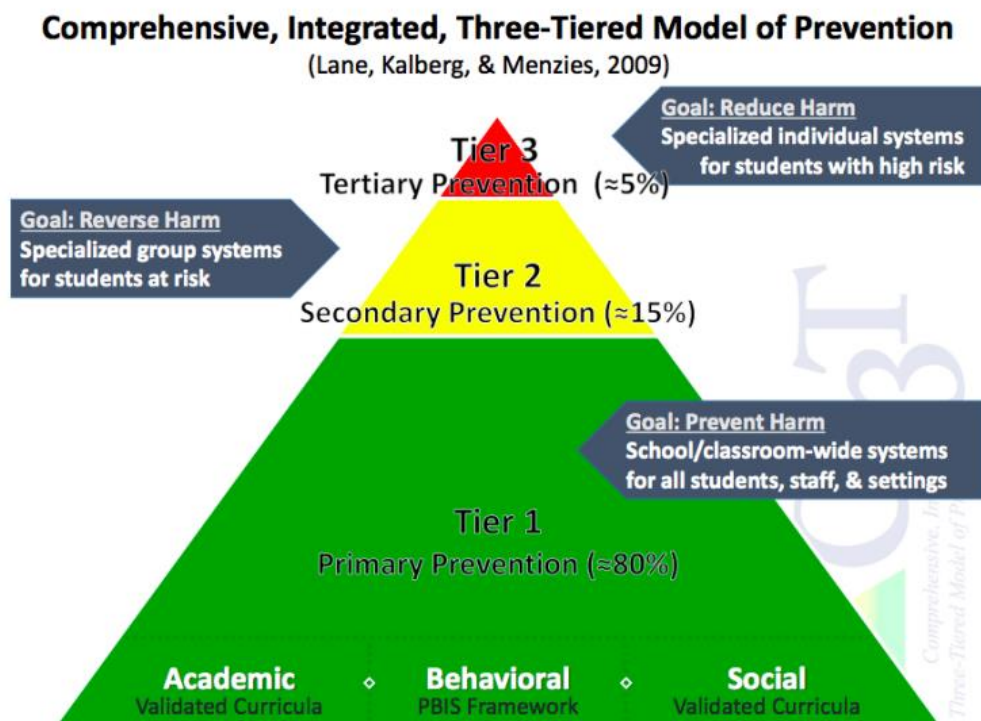
Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) is a school-wide framework used to assist educators in providing targeted support for students experiencing learning challenges. Multi-tiered systems of support is a proactive approach that uses evidence-based practices, including research-based core instruction and interventions (*Quick Guide for Multi-Tiered System of Supports: The Classroom*, n.d). Within the evidence-based practices, core instruction and specialized interventions, there are also three levels of prevention strategies that progress within the three tiers of support. Figure 1 represents a three-tiered structure (MTSS) that introduces three prevention goals: preventing, reducing, and reversing harm.

In Tier 1 of MTSS, all students are included in primary prevention strategies through implementation of universal core academic, social, and behavioral systems of support. Whereas Tiers 2 and 3 focus on reversing and reducing harm as a goal of prevention. These tiers include a more targeted group of students who may be at risk of needing more focused support. A strong universal core and focus on the prevention of harm can create the foundation of evidence-based practices and encourages a positive learning environment for all students. This framework also

helps identify the students who need support and allows educators to intervene early in the year to support individual students in their academics as well as their behavioral, social, and emotional needs. Several strategies are also used within MTSS to meet these specific needs.

**Figure 1**

*Three-Tiered Model of Prevention*



In addition to the tiered prevention of harm within MTSS, is a framework that supports students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs. Multi-tiered Systems of Support are used in conjunction with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS). This support system is used to improve the social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes of students as well as improve school climate and improve teachers' well-being (PBIS, 2022). PBIS is part of MTSS as it provides an example of a structure used to support students' behavioral and academic outcomes.

Through universal instruction, all students are supported by PBIS. This support can be shown through teaching school-wide behavior expectations and tools like PAX Good Behavior Game which helps students learn social and self-management skills as well as encourages positive classroom behaviors (Education Development Center, 2013). PBIS has been noticed as a system that can increase reading scores and decrease disruptive behaviors in the classroom and is used throughout the Tiers of support in MTSS (McIntosh et al., 2023). However, to fully meet the needs of each student, MTSS must consist of several different angles and tiers of support rather than one tool that supports behavior.

At Tier 1, the whole class is included in MTSS, meaning that all students in the general classroom and the general education teachers are involved. In this Tier, educators use evidence-based instructional plans that address students' needs and align with school-wide positive behavioral support plans (Center on PBIS, 2023). The students in Tier 1 often work in small groups based on their strengths and areas of need. The teachers monitor the student's progress and perform a screening assessment on all students, and the data is then reviewed to identify students who may be at risk and need additional testing or observations (Rosen, 2014). However, the students who do not respond well to Tier 1, may need extra support. This is where the students are then referred to Tier 2 to get additional support.

Students in Tier 2 still attend Tier 1 with the general class for lessons; however, the students who were accurately assessed and identified as at risk for learning challenges may be placed in smaller groups that intend to provide more targeted support (Rosen, 2014). Within Tier 2, there are several interventions and unique teaching strategies used to support students. Throughout Tier 2, educators track the progress of the student and their response to a more targeted intervention. Targeted intervention includes several staff meetings that focus on specific



students' needs. The meetings often involve the teacher, school counselor, school psychologist, associate principal, and learning specialists, where all the staff discusses individual problem-solving strategies that could be used to support each of the students individually in Tier 2 (August et. al, 2018). Tier 2 also includes the students who do not progress over a set amount of time that either stay in Tier 2 or move to Tier 3.

Students in Tier 3 involve individual students that do not respond to interventions or supports in Tier 1 or 2. This Tier provides the students who need extra support with more intensive interventions such as mental health support from outside agencies or specific interventions to provide educational and social-emotional support (August et. al, 2018). In addition, the student receiving Tier 3 support may have an individualized behavior support plan (BSP), where the student's progress in social, emotional, and behavioral learning is actively tracked by staff. A functional behavior assessment (FBA) is used to guide the development of a student's behavior support plan (BSPs) to ensure teachers are effectively preventing, teaching, and responding to the student's needs (Borgemier et. al, 2014). Students receiving Tier 3 support may also receive special education services through an evaluation to determine the student's eligibility for special education services.

While schools have historically focused on students' academic development, schools must focus more on social, emotional, and behavioral needs. By focusing on the student's social, emotional, and behavioral needs, students are more likely to be in the classroom longer, improve their attendance, develop prosocial behaviors early on, build on social awareness, and improve self-management skills (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003, as cited in Steed et al., 2022). This shift in focus can be done through using MTSS in schools and by the staff's commitment to use. Through MTSS, all students are included in at least one of the three tiers,

supporting all students in their social, emotional, behavioral, and academic needs. However, the focus needs to change for schools to support their students more than just academically, as social, emotional, and behavioral skills are necessary for students to succeed.

### **Study Purpose**

Although schools are steadily shifting the focus to social, emotional, and behavioral learning, there is an increasing need for additional research to understand how MTSS is implemented in schools, what specific strategies are being used to include students at risk, and what barriers have made it challenging for schools to include students who are at risk for learning challenges. This study aimed to add to existing research and guide future research by noting the perspectives of staff at an Elementary school who are actively implementing MTSS in their school. A qualitative approach was necessary to collect firsthand information on how students are supported through MTSS. A qualitative approach can help researchers to understand participants' beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behaviors, and interactions. This approach is seen as a more humanistic approach to collecting critical information in research (Pathak et al., 2013).

To gain perspective, a series of interview questions were presented to six educators with mostly all differing roles within the sample elementary school. Throughout each of the interviews, the following research questions were discussed: (a) how is MTSS currently implemented at your school? (b) how are students who experience social, emotional, or behavioral challenges included in MTSS at your school? (c) what specific strategies have been used at your school to include students who are at risk for learning challenges? (d) what specific barriers have made it challenging to include students with social, emotional, and behavioral needs in MTSS at your school? and (e) how does your team plan to sustain and monitor the overall effectiveness of MTSS to meet the ongoing needs of students and staff?

## Methodology

### Participants

This research began with an institutional review board acceptance that gave approval for this study to be conducted. The sample group of this study consisted of six participants from an elementary school that was actively implementing MTSS. The focus group of participants consisted of one administrator, two general educators, one literacy specialist, and two learning specialists. The participating school was new to the implementation of MTSS. Although, they previously implemented a similar framework of support referred to as RTI or response to intervention. However, through using MTSS as a new framework, educators are provided with a more in-depth solution and response to intervention that focuses on more than just academia. Response to Intervention (RTI) focuses mainly on improving academic performance and behavior (*National Center on Response to Intervention Essential Components of RTI -A Closer Look at Response to Intervention*, 2010), whereas MTSS serves more as a systematic approach that addresses conditions for creating a successful systems approach to intervention as well as a stronger focus on social and emotional learning (*A Blueprint for Massachusetts Educators*, n.d.). When used with fidelity, MTSS will benefit the whole student and improve social-emotional learning.

Given that MTSS is a newer approach to intervention, it is crucial that more research is conducted to further understand how MTSS is being implemented and gain perspective by interviewing educators using this support system. To gain insight for this study, an elementary school principal actively implementing MTSS was sent a recruitment email. This email included a brief overview of what was being researched, the number of requested participants, and the interview process. We then asked the participating administrator to email willing staff with this

information as well as the researcher's emails to contact the participants throughout the duration of the study. Six participants responded with contact information and with the times that the participants were available to participate in an interview. There were no incentives given for participating in this study and all participants were ensured their privacy by keeping any identifiable information in a password-protected university Zoom account.

Table 1 discusses the participant's demographics, leaving out any identifiable information to protect the participant's right to confidentiality. This table includes the (a) participants' roles, (b) years spent in specific roles, (c) years in the district, (d) grade levels served, and (e) essential background information. This table provides a guide in giving perspective on each participant's related use of MTSS within the specific roles.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Participant roles	Years in specific role (e.g., general education, special education, reading specialist)	Years in District	Grade levels served	Important background information
Administrator	5 years	11 years	K-5	
General Educator	25 years	8 years	2 <sup>nd</sup> grade	
General Educator	1 year	7 years	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	Learning specialist for 6 years prior
Literacy Specialist	8 years	10 years	K-5	Title one coordinator
Learning Specialist	2 years	2 years	K-5	
Learning Specialist	No response	No response	K-5	

*Note.* Table 1 tracks the participant's data that was reported via email communication. It includes important demographics that could impact the use of MTSS in the participating school and what Tiers of MTSS were used depending on specific roles

## Procedures

Before recruiting participants, we obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board at Portland State University to conduct this study. Qualitative data for this study was collected once the participants were recruited. Each participant was given the option to interview via Zoom or in person. In response to an email, all participants requested that the interviews be done via Zoom. Zoom video communications is an online platform that allows individuals to participate in conferences and meetings virtually. The participants were then selected from a list of available times for an interview, to which each responded via Google email. Before each interview, the participants were given a brief review of the study and reminded that any identifying information would be protected via a password-protected university google drive account. Verbal consent to record was then given before the recording of each interview.

The questions used in the interviews were as follows, (1) how is MTSS currently implemented at your school? (2) how are students who experience social, emotional, or behavioral challenges included in MTSS at your school? (3) what specific strategies have been used at your school to include students who are at risk for learning challenges? (4) what specific barriers have made it challenging to include students with social, emotional, and behavioral needs in MTSS at your school? and (5) how does your team plan to sustain and monitor the overall effectiveness of MTSS to meet the ongoing needs of students and staff? Although each participant was asked the same interview questions, not all participants had the same roles. The participants were given probe questions throughout the interview in addition to the main interview questions if needed. Probe questions were utilized to gain more insight into the participants' use of MTSS.

At the end of each recorded interview, a video recording and a transcript of the interview were uploaded via Zoom recording options. The transcripts were checked for accuracy and updated to fit the recordings verbatim. The recordings and transcripts were password-protected by a university email and destroyed 30 days after the interview.

### **Data analysis**

Transcripts were analyzed using thematic content analysis; by arranging the collected data via qualitative summative analysis, trends and common themes presented across participants were identified. A summative content analysis compares and tracks keywords throughout the received content (Hsieh et al., 2023). Transcripts of the interviews were read over a series of times to ensure the video recordings matched the transcripts verbatim. The transcripts were read over several times and with different intentions each time. The first reading of the transcripts was to gain a general idea of what the participants mentioned and to double-check the transcripts compared to the recorded video on Zoom. The second reading was used to edit any words that may have been missed and to go back through the video recordings to check for accuracy. The final reading of the transcripts was used to track similar keywords and themes in the transcripts and the recordings.

Table 2 shows the analysis results by arranging collected transcript data, tracking keywords and themes, and comparing received content. These results indicate recurrent themes in the strategies used across the staff and similar experiences within the barriers of MTSS.

**Table 2**

*Qualitative summative analysis*

Interview Question 1: How is MTSS currently implemented at your school?	Question 2: How are students who experience social, emotional, or behavioral challenges included in MTSS at your school?	Question 3: What specific strategies have been used at your school to include students who are at risk for learning challenges?	Question 4: What specific barriers have made it challenging to include students with social, emotional, and behavioral needs in MTSS at your school?	Question 5: How does your team plan to sustain and monitor the overall effectiveness of MTSS to meet the ongoing needs of students and staff?
20-minute, Tier 1 morning meeting in classrooms for SEL (Caring School Communities)	Staff meetings to discuss specific students' needs involving the teacher, school counselor, psychologist, associate principal, and learning specialist. (Individual Problem-Solving)	Monitoring systems to help the students in creative ways  Strengths-based interventions	Balancing different students' needs at the same time	Consistent staff meetings regarding intervention programs
PAX Good Behavior Game	Behavior support plan based on a Functional Behavior	Check-in, check-out model	Not enough staff that focuses on behavior	Mentor support for staff
	One-on-one support	Social Skills Group	A stronger focus on behavior training	



**Table 2**

*Qualitative summative analysis*

Interview Question 1: How is MTSS currently implemented at your school?	Question 2: How are students who experience social, emotional, or behavioral challenges included in MTSS at your school?	Question 3: What specific strategies have been used at your school to include students who are at risk for learning challenges?	Question 4: What specific barriers have made it challenging to include students with social, emotional, and behavioral needs in MTSS at your school?	Question 5: How does your team plan to sustain and monitor the overall effectiveness of MTSS to meet the ongoing needs of students and staff?
PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and support)	Breaks throughout the day	Point sheets	Consistent training on new programs	Retraining staff
Resource rooms	Tier 2 (Intervention)	Class points	Staff communication and organization	Change in student caseloads
Twenty percent and 100% meetings to discuss intervention change	The practice of Zones of Regulation	Communication with the students		More consistent staff meetings

## Results

The process of analyzing the summative content resulted in finding common themes that were expressed throughout the received data. The main findings that emerged during this process were in reference to the research questions: (a) implementation of support systems, (b) strategies, (c) barriers, and (d) plans for sustainability.

### Implementation of support systems

All participants ( $n=6$ ) reported using at least one support system when actively supporting students who experience social, emotional, and behavioral challenges within the sample school. Standard support systems participant's practice includes Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), PAX Body, Effort, and Kindness (classroom management, good behavior game), and Behavior Support Plans (BSP).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) are used in correspondence with MTSS. Within PBIS, school teams collect and use data to select, monitor and evaluate outcomes, practices, and systems across all MTSS tiers (PBIS, 2022). One administrator indicated that "All of our PBIS materials are incentives and consistent with school-wide rules are based on a system called PAX... that is the behavior management system that we use district-wide so that alongside PBIS makes up our behavior expectations." Most participants ( $n=4$ ) discussed using PBIS in their school as a support system that assists in the goal-setting process of using positive behaviors. However, not all participants mentioned using PBIS.

In addition, PAX Good Behavior Game was mentioned several times in each participant's interview. According to the Education Development Center (2013), PAX is a set of strategies that helps students learn critical self-management skills while collaborating closely with a team

of educators to make their classrooms peaceful and productive. PAX Good Behavior Game was described by one of the general educators through a focus student stating,

PAX means safe hands, safe body, safe feet, and PAX words means kind words. So, it's PAX body, PAX words, and then listening because those are what his IEP goals are, so that is what we are focusing on, then throughout the day I fill it out on a point sheet. He's a kid that doesn't take breaks. And so as long as it's filled out by the end of the day, at the end of the day he's earned his points.

This support system is used within the school's classrooms and seems to work for most of the students in Tier 1 of MTSS; however, not all educators use the same support system.

Lastly is the Behavioral Support Plan (BSP). These plans are used within Tier 3 of MTSS and are primarily geared towards a smaller percentage of students who need a system for behavior support. Behavior Support Plans are based on the readings of a functional behavior assessment formed through a series of checks observed by the school's psychologist and counselors, then the process of selecting interventions that fit the implementation context and ways to support implementation come into context (Borgmeier et al., 2014). According to *Special Education / Behavior Support Plan (2022)*, "The BSP applies the information gathered through functional behavior assessment to specify strategies (skills to be taught, environmental changes, reinforcement, and reactive strategies) to reduce the behavior of concern." These plans are not used by every educator unless they have students who are in Tier 3 of MTSS or students who came from another school with a BSP. One of the learning specialists stated,

We normally start with a functional behavior assessment. And that is done by the school counselor or school psych, and then we create a behavior support plan, and that is with the Gen Ed teacher and the learning specialist. Sometimes the parent, whoever works closely with the student.

Learning specialists seemed to work more closely with the students and were more likely to use a Behavioral Support Plan.

## Strategies

Participants were asked to discuss specific strategies that are used to include students who are at risk of learning challenges. The common strategies discussed included: a) zones of regulation, b) check-in, check-out model, c) push into the classrooms or pull students out, d) social skills group and e) class points and point sheets.

All participants referred to a strategy called Zones of Regulation. This tool is an approach used to support children in developing skills to self-regulate. Zones of Regulation are expressed through four colors that separate different zones of emotion: green meaning, calm, or happy; yellow, feeling silly or frustrated; red, angry, or out of control; and blue, sad, or tired (*Zones of Regulation -Overview*, 2016). Each zone allows the child to feel in control, identify their emotions, and to be aware of what zone they are in. All participants mentioned using Zones of Regulation. For example, one learning specialist explained Zones of Regulation, “Tier one in the classroom looks like zones curriculum. We focus on the zones curriculum, a lot of green, red, and yellow zones, and like promoting kids to use that, we also use the PAX system.” Frequent and consistent use of Zones of Regulation can help students express their emotions in their everyday environment and help educators understand the student's needs.

Another strategy commonly used across the school was the check-in, check-out model. This model is frequently used to support students included in Tier 2 and Tier 3 of MTSS and may need extra support from learning specialists, counselors, and staff. Staff who are supporting the student may ask a student to check in with them during the day on how they are doing. For example, one literacy specialist explained,

We also have a classified support person that works directly with our counselor for things like check-in to check out and has students that are on their radar. So that any time that they are needing a break or any kind of social, emotional support, we have got that so

they either have just a check in check out, or they've got a 504, which would give them kind of a stronger identification in terms of social, emotional learning and support.

However, some students may be supported better through a push into classrooms or pull out of classrooms program with a specialist where the same support group works closely with a student(s) who are experiencing social, emotional, or learning challenges and may need staff to pull them out of the classroom for intensive support before returning to the classroom or may need staff to sit with the student and support them. An example of this support strategy is explained through one of the learning specialist's perspectives,

We also focus on pushing into the classroom for students and supporting them with their social, emotional, and behavioral needs. In the classroom, we do that through their SDI (specially designed instruction), and I mean it carries through all areas of the school. We are just constantly focusing on PAX, zones of regulation, and whatever their IEP goals are.

In addition to the support systems, two strategies are more commonly used in general education classrooms. These strategies include social skills groups and class points. The social skills group is used in the classrooms as a part of the Caring School Communities and is implemented into the mornings of every classroom as part of the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum. Each morning, students discuss a grade-appropriate topic with the whole class. For example, in one of the general educator's classrooms, the social skills group can be explained as,

Any class-wide things we need to discuss if we want to change something and also where we do our caring school community curriculum, and then we also embed like, it is black history month and so we are doing things like in here, where it may not fit in other parts of the day. The main focus is really building that community with the students between each other and with me.

Similarly, class points are used as a strategy in general classrooms. Class points motivate the students and their classmates to be a part of the positive support systems within the

classrooms. In turn, for the points, some general educators give prizes or incentives to the students or the classes that are doing well. This strategy works well for students motivated by adult attention or praise and can also be used to support students throughout all Tiers of MTSS in the classroom.

### **Barriers**

Participants expressed barriers including (a) difficulty in balancing different students' needs at the same time, (b) not enough staff that focuses on behavior, (c) not enough focus on behavior training, (d) consistent training on new programs, and (e) staff communication and organization.

Participants reported similar barriers experienced within using MTSS at this sample school. The administrator mentioned a significant barrier of staff fidelity that would affect the overall use of MTSS throughout the school,

You have to have your entire school staff using it with fidelity, which means everyone has to use the same language. They have to use it consistently, and any of the PBIS systems, the 'positive behavioral intervention systems,' all rely on positive reinforcement, and it is also not everybody's natural style to be positive, and to try praising here, and you know, positively reminding kids of the rule and all the things instead.

Without all staff on board using the same strategies, it could be difficult to balance different students' needs at the same time because they are all using different systems. However, if all staff were to use MTSS with fidelity, it may be easier to support students who are at risk for learning challenges because they are not trying to learn several systems all at once.

Another common barrier the participants expressed is that there needs to be a stronger focus and more training on behavior. Students are experiencing more intense social, emotional, and behavioral responses to being at school. Without a particular set of skills or training on how

to support students with significant behaviors, it could become very overwhelming for the school's educators. For example, a learning specialist expressed the barrier of trying to do it all without the proper training stating that,

Sometimes we try to give them what they need, but we do not know what they need. I am a learning specialist, but I am not a behavior specialist, so trying to come up with these fixes on my own can be challenging. So, we do not have someone in this school that is purely focused on behavior which can be tough.

Equally significant barriers are consistent training on new programs, staff communication, and organization. This was expressed as a barrier to almost all participants ( $n=5$ ) as it could be challenging to keep track of different support systems within MTSS, and complex for all school staff to use these support systems with fidelity and consistency. It is also difficult to implement systems of support when there are gaps in staff communication and organization. For example, one general educator stated, "I think that communication can be a big barrier when you can only send so many emails in a day."

### **Plans for sustainability**

We asked educators, "How their team plans to sustain and monitor the overall effectiveness of MTSS to meet the ongoing needs of students and staff?" Educators responded with four examples: (a) mentoring support for staff, (b) consistent staff meetings regarding intervention programs, (c) retraining staff, and (d) changing student caseloads. A learning specialist expressed these needs by saying,

We all have our hands in 60 different baskets like I have to be able to know how to program for a high-needs kid, and then also how to teach a kid who has a severe learning disability like, and then manage super aggressive behavior.

With more staff, retraining, and a change in student caseloads, learning specialists would not have to go through trying to assist so many students with different learning needs all at the same time. This can be incredibly stressful for any educator, therefore these plans for sustainability would really need to be introduced.

### Discussion

This qualitative analysis aimed to examine (a) how MTSS is currently implemented at a school? (b) how are students who experience social, emotional, or behavioral challenges included in MTSS at your school? (c) what specific strategies have been used to include students who are at risk for learning challenges? (d) what specific barriers have made it challenging to include students with social, emotional, and behavioral needs in MTSS? and (e) how does your team plan to sustain and monitor the overall effectiveness of MTSS to meet the ongoing needs of students and staff? Even though there has so far been little research on implementing MTSS in schools, it is increasingly important for schools to support their students more than just academically.

Findings from this study provide insight into how a school is currently implementing MTSS and the perspectives of MTSS that administrators, general educators, learning specialists, and literacy specialists have. Previous research explored several support systems within MTSS but rarely received the perspective of the ones who implement new support systems within the schools and mostly focused on the academic side of learning. With a closer look into the social, emotional, and behavioral sides and supporting intrinsic learning in Multi-tiered Systems of support, students may be more willing to learn and be present in classrooms for themselves (Knesek, 2022). Several participants mentioned that the biggest issue was not having enough training or ways to help students with big behaviors stay in the classrooms. This study provides insight into how Multi-tiered Systems of Support, Positive Behavioral Interventions, and Behavior Support Plans can assist both students and educators in accessing a more positive environment in their classrooms and school. Each of these supports is provided within MTSS and is used to support students who experience social, emotional, or behavioral challenges.



We also reviewed the effectiveness of implementing MTSS and showed that by implementing this support system with fidelity, could also improve the overall mental wellness and aid in a more positive environment for the educators and their classrooms (Ross et al., 2011). With extra help and a more positive environment in classrooms and schools, this framework can benefit educators and students in a positive and consistent way.

### **Implications**

This qualitative study revealed that the participating school was actively implementing Multi-tiered Systems of Support and the school, and its staff have a set of strategies that have been used consistently to support students who experience social, emotional, or behavioral challenges. Each of the participants utilized their own specific training to support their students, while some of the participants fully use systems and tools that are supported through MTSS. However, most participants mentioned the need for a more consistent structure as well as the need for more training on behavior support. More in-depth research on how Multi-tiered Systems of Support can benefit students as well as teachers is needed to better understand how implementing support systems like MTSS can navigate some of the barriers that educators face.

### **Limitations**

A few limitations were apparent in this study that could be better addressed in future research. First was the small sample size that was recruited. Although ten participants were preferred, only six participants responded with a willingness to participate in the interview. The second limitation was that this study only consisted of one school as the sample; therefore, this study relied on a partial literature review to compare perspectives. The third implication was that this study did not include any direct observational or functional analysis of MTSS used within this sample elementary school; therefore, effectiveness was purely based on educators'

perspectives. Future research could include collecting additional qualitative data through larger samples, classroom observations, and reporting on students' responses to intervention.

### **Conclusion**

Even though the social-emotional curriculum is making its way to most schools within the United States, the focus needs to shift to social, emotional, and behavioral support. By implementing Multi-tiered Systems of Support in schools, educators and students can be better supported with their social, emotional, and behavioral needs. The findings of this study suggest that educators need extra support and more training in support systems like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support, PAX Good Behavior Game, and Zones of Regulation to fully help their students succeed socially, emotionally, behaviorally, and academically. The focus should no longer be on just academics to support the students who are at risk for learning challenges; instead, the focus should be on support systems that can support the whole student.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Email Script

Dear [administrator name omitted],

My name is Hannah Steely, and I am an undergraduate psychology student in the Honors Program at Portland State University. I am conducting a research project on how schools support students who experience academic, social, emotional, and behavioral challenges with Professor Dr. Sheldon Loman of the Special Education Department at Portland State University.

I am searching for about 10 individuals to participate in my research project. I am hoping to interview two teachers, each from kindergarten, second, fourth, and fifth grade levels, as well as one special education teacher. If willing, I would also appreciate an interview with you as an administrator. All interviews are aimed to last about 15 minutes but no more than 30 minutes. Your name or any other identifiable information will be confidential.

This research will consist of interviewing each willing participant on how they support students who experience academic, social, emotional, and behavioral challenges in their classrooms as well as how their school supports these students.

Thank you for your consideration, and I hope to hear from you! Your help will be much appreciated.

If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact me, Hannah Steely - [email omitted] or my advisor at Sheldon Loman- [email omitted]

Best,

Hannah Steely

## Appendix B: Interview Research Questions Script

## General Education and Special Education Teacher Interview Script

## Introduction

Hi, my name is Hannah Steely. I am an Undergraduate at Portland State University. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. I expect this interview to take approximately 15 minutes. Does this amount of time work for you?

If yes, proceed with the interview.

If no, find a time that would work better with their schedule.

Our study focuses on how schools support students who experience social, emotional, and behavioral challenges and are at risk for learning challenges. I am going to ask a few questions about the implementation of MTSS (Multi-Tiered Systems of Support) at your school and practices involving students who are at risk for learning challenges. For the purpose of this study, at-risk students include students who experience social, emotional, or behavioral challenges that may interfere with their academic growth.

A risk to participating in this study is the possibility of breach of confidentiality. We will take measures to protect your privacy, including not collecting any information that would connect you to your personal identity. You, as well as your school, will remain anonymous for this research project. A voice recording device will be used to store the participant's responses to the interview questions. These recordings will be backed up in a Portland State University password-protected google drive. Recorded data will not be personally identifiable, and the recordings will be deleted after data is collected. Participation is completely voluntary, and you may choose not to answer any questions or discontinue the interview at any point. Do you agree to the recording of this conversation?

If yes, proceed with the interview.

If no, ask, "Do you agree to complete the interview where I record your answers using paper and pencil?"

If yes, proceed with the interview.

If no, discontinue the interview.

Before getting started, do you have any questions?

If yes, respond to questions if any

If no, proceed with the interview

Great, I will start the audio recording now (if agreed to audio recording)

If agreed to audio recording, start recording now

#### MTSS – General

1. How is MTSS currently implemented at your school?
2. How are students who experience social, emotional, or behavioral challenges included in MTSS at your school?
3. What specific strategies have been used at your school to include students who are at risk for learning challenges?
4. What specific barriers have made it challenging to include students with social, emotional, and behavioral needs in MTSS at your school?

#### Probe questions for Questions 1-4

1. Can you tell me more about current [strategies/barriers] at the Tier [1-3] level?
2. Can you tell me more about the [strategies/barriers] related to the systems to support teachers and staff in implementing practices for students with social, emotional, and behavioral needs regarding MTSS?
3. Can you tell me more about the [strategies/barriers] regarding the practices used to improve the academic growth and socio-emotional learning outcomes for students who are at risk for learning challenges, specifically in MTSS?
4. Can you tell me more about how your team plans to sustain and monitor the overall effectiveness of MTSS to meet the ongoing needs of students and staff?